

## THE BULBULS OF THE NILGÍRIS.

(With 2 plates.)

BY

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The Bulbul family, the *Pycnonotidæ*, is well represented on these hills. From the plains level to the summit of the highest peaks, in the heart of the towns or the depths of the jungle, members of the clan are always in evidence and their cheerful voices provide a very large proportion of the bird music that falls upon the ear.

Six species have been recorded from the district, of which four are common and two rare, and it is unlikely that any others occur. They are all arboreal in habit and seldom come to the ground except to gather nesting material and when they do their weak, short legs will hardly support them and they shuffle about in a very awkward manner. As a family they are catholic in their feeding habits. Whilst some species are almost entirely frugivorous, most of them consume large quantities of insect food and are always ready to turn fly-catcher especially when a flight of termites is in progress.

Though none of them have any song, properly speaking, yet their calls are usually tuneful and always light hearted and even the Black Bulbul whose voice is harsh and raucous seems inspired with such sheer exuberance of spirits that one can forgive its discordance.

By far the most familiar of them all is the Red-whiskered Bulbul, *Otocompsa emeria fuscicaudata*. It is probably the commonest and certainly the most conspicuous bird on the Nilgiris at all elevations. Tame and confiding to a degree, it delights in gardens and cultivated country but is equally common in open scrubby jungle, though it avoids heavy forest and the bare, treeless, grass downs of the plateau. Though not strictly speaking gregarious, loose flocks of considerable size are often to be seen after the breeding season, but, if carefully watched, these will be found to consist of a number of independent pairs. They do not seem to wander a great deal and each pair usually remains in the neighbourhood of its breeding haunts throughout the year.

This species is quite omnivorous and plays havoc with fruit in gardens and has a playful habit of pulling up the most valuable of the seedlings which the 'mali' has just put out in the flower beds. It however consumes a great many insects, many, no doubt, harmful which must be put to its credit. It not infrequently comes to the ground to feed, but it is by no means at home there. At times especially in the evening, it will try its skill at fly-catching, darting out from some outstanding twig and displaying considerable dexterity though it is not such an adept as the Black Bulbul.

It is a noisy bird and has a variety of calls. The one which seems to correspond most nearly to a song is a rollicking phrase sounding like 'The Rice must be finished off'. In the breeding season the

males may often be seen posturing before their mates with drooping, quivering wings and tail, repeating this sentence over and over again, evidently under the impression that they are songsters of the highest order! The alarm note is a harsh 'lerrrr'. This is employed when the nest is approached or when there is a hawk or owl in the vicinity and it may often be heard in the evening when the birds are going to roost and each seems to feel it incumbent on him to scold at the top of his voice by way of a goodnight, just as the English blackbirds scream and cackle in the shrubberies at dusk.

The nesting season is prolonged and stray nests may be found in any month, but the main period is from February to June and again in September after the South-West monsoon.

The nest is a shallow and usually fairly neat cup of twigs and dead leaves bound with cobwebs especially round the rim. The lining is nearly always roots and dead grass, but I once found one lined with hair. Almost any site may be chosen but it is seldom far from and is sometimes actually on the ground. The most usual situation is in some low bush or evergreen shrub, or in a creeper growing up a wall or verandah. It is usually fairly well concealed and, where the birds breed in big patches of *Lantana* or other scrub, may be quite hard to find. In gardens and where cover is scarce, any bush that provides some sort of shelter is certain to be occupied. The highest nest I have ever found was some fifteen feet up at the end of a branch of an isolated Blackwood tree; but this is out of the ordinary. The birds are very faithful to their favourite site. One pair always breed every year in a bamboo just outside my bungalow. This year they had a nest there with two eggs early in March which successfully hatched after eleven days' incubation. They were very circumspect in approaching the nest and I never saw them building. The hen, presumably, sat very close and would allow me almost to touch her before flying off. Both birds fed the young and seemed to bring nothing but flies and caterpillars. I have seen fledgelings, however, given *Lantana* berries. Unfortunately, these young disappeared after a few days, a crow being almost certainly the culprit. Nothing daunted, the Bulbuls built another nest a fortnight later in just the same spot, but again disaster overtook them, after which they gave it up and built in a small Dadap tree some thirty yards away.

In this part of the world the normal clutch is two, three being rare, and a bird in my garden is at the present date, June 18th, sitting on a single egg—probably a third or fourth brood. The eggs vary a good deal both in size and colouring, but in this district there appear to be two main types. The commoner is pinkish in ground colour, heavily freckled and mottled uniformly all over with small spots and speckles of various shades of purple and reddish-brown so that the ground colour is hardly visible. In the other type, the markings are a beautiful, rich, mahogany-red with no purple or pink at all and so heavy as almost to obscure the white ground colour.

Common and tame as they are, I have not found them easy birds to photograph. Building a hide and clearing a view for the lens always attracts the crows and in the more open situation the nests are time and again robbed before one can get any pictures. When the nest is in a thick bush, the birds have a most annoying habit of

creeping up from behind and carefully keeping the nest between themselves and the camera, so that all one sees is a head. Plate No. 1 took three hours to obtain. The nest contained young and I had put up the hide some days before, so that the parents were quite used to it but they were very shy of the lens and absolutely refused to give a good pose, creeping up from behind to feed the young and showing the greatest alarm at the sound of the shutter. Finally however one of them settled down to brood and became as bold as she had hitherto been timid. Nothing seemed to disturb her, neither the shutter nor the noise of changing plates. She allowed me to take a second exposure without the slightest movement and only flew off upon my emerging from the hide.

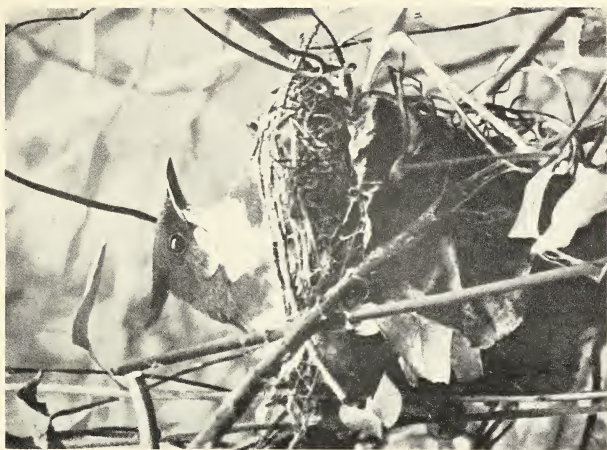
This species is unmistakable for any other. It has a black head with a long pointed crest jutting forward like Punch's cap and only depressed in flight or when sitting on the nest. The patches of crimson on the cheeks and vent, the white throat and underparts and the incomplete gorget of brown on the breast are all quite distinctive.

The young birds on leaving the nest lack the red on the cheeks and vent and their crests are very short, but they quickly put on mature plumage and do not stay with their parents for more than a few weeks.

The Madras Red-vented Bulbul, *Molpastes cafer cafer* is very similar to the last species in all its habits, but in this district is not nearly so common or widely distributed. It is a bird of lower elevations. Davison obtained a straggler, near Ootacamund at 7,000 feet, but this is most unusual. According to him, it begins to become common just above Coonoor at about 5,000 feet and is very common all down the Eastern slopes. On the Western side, I have never seen it above 4,000 feet and it is nowhere very common. Even at the foot of the slopes on the Wynaad plateau, it is not numerous anywhere south of Gudalur. From Gudalur northwards, however, it increases in numbers till it becomes the common species on the Mysore plains. It is restricted to drier country and will never be found in heavy forest, preferring open parkland, light deciduous jungle, gardens and cultivation. It is not a gregarious species and is nearly always to be seen in pairs. It feeds on the ground occasionally and consumes a large variety of insects, seeds and berries and, like the Red-whiskered Bulbul, can be very destructive in gardens. The nest is indistinguishable from that of *Otocompsa emeria* and is built in just the same situations; but the eggs, which vary considerably, are of quite a different type, being much more boldly and sparingly marked.

The Madras Red-vented Bulbul has a black head with short bushy crest, dark brown upper parts with lighter fish-scale markings, sooty breast, white rump, crimson patch on the vent and the white tips to the tail feathers.

The Black Bulbul, *Micrscelis psaroides ganeesa*, is purely a hill species, and does not occur much below 4,500 feet except as a scarce wanderer in the cold weather. Above that level, however, it is extremely common. It is a very different bird from either of the last two species, being entirely arboreal and keeping very much to the tree-tops, seldom descending even as low as the undergrowth.



RED-WHISKERED BULBUL ON NEST.  
(*Molpastes cafer cafer*.)



NEST OF RED-WHISKERED BULBUL.  
(*Molpastes cafer cafer*.)

